

Growth Task Force presents its recommendations

CHESTERFIELD — The Growth Task Force recently presented its recommendations to the Chesterfield County School Board during a work session. The task force's report includes 12 recommendations, seven affirmations of current practices and four areas for further study.

Made up of school officials, county leaders and community residents and co-chaired by School Board member David Wyman and former Virginia Superintendent of Public Instruction Jo Lynne DeMary, the Growth Task Force was established by the School Board to study growth-related issues, then make planning and budget recommendations.

From May through October, the Growth Task Force heard from Chesterfield's most knowledgeable staff members and from experts from other large school systems that have faced growth-related challenges. Topics included student enrollment, school capacity, security and maintenance needs, energy efficiency, alternatives to bricks and mortar, cost of school construction and the budget process.

More than 58,000 students are enrolled in Chesterfield County Public Schools, which is the fourth-largest school division in the state and one of the 100 largest in the country. Since 2000, the school division has grown by about 1,000 students each year. Of the school system's 64 schools, 29 are at or above their functional capacity. Also, 27 of the schools are more than 40 years old and only six schools are less than 10 years old.

The report includes recommendations in three areas:

Recommendations for school construction include helping the community and policymakers better understand the correlation between functional capacity and the need for school renovation and construction, adopting guidelines on using trailers as classrooms and prioritizing based on current and projected data the 13 new schools included in the county's proposed Public Facilities Plan.

Recommendations about the cost and financing of school construction include reviewing educational specifications (square feet, acres, etc.) for new schools, building schools

to LEED silver energy efficiency standards, bidding more than one school at a time and allowing more time for construction.

Recommendations about alternatives to bricks and mortar include reviewing early graduation and online education models, holding community discussions about alternative scheduling and revising the waiver policy to allow students to voluntarily transfer

from schools that are above functional capacity into schools that have space available.

The report of the Growth Task Force was also presented during the School Board's Dec. 9 business meeting, which began at 7 p.m. in the public meeting room, 10001 Iron Bridge Road. A copy of the task force's PowerPoint presentation is available at chesterfield.k12.va.us.

Public Education — A Poorly Delivered Good

EDITOR, TIMES-DISPATCH:

Greg Muzik's opposition to school choice is so consistently wrong-headed and well-written that his recent letter, "Should Poor Receive Vouchers for Everything?" demands a timely response. Muzik asks, "Why would the government set up a system of public schools, then pay parents to leave it?"

The attentive citizen will have noticed that schools are conspicuous for the unusual manner in which we deliver this public good. Most public goods are publicly funded but privately provided. Medicare services aren't provided by government doctors, for instance. We provide food stamps, but don't run the grocery store. Even in the military, we laud competitive bidding by private contractors as the best way for government to obtain or provide effective, efficient, high-quality goods and services.

Yet education doesn't work this way. We provide publicly funded education only to those who will accept delivery of that education through a nationalized and unionized monopoly. That makes no sense.

We should continue to publicly fund education, because universal basic education truly is a public good — a shared one. But we should allow citizens to choose any legitimate source from which to receive it, whether that be the traditional public schools, charter public schools, or private or parochial schools. Even home educators should receive a reduced and fixed stipend to cover their education expenses and be thanked for taking some burden off the public finances.

Muzik agrees with none of that, for his stated reason: "Public schools are for all. Private schools are exclusive." I can understand that. If I had a union job at a weak and threatened monopoly, I suppose I, too, would be offended by meritocracy, choice, and competition.

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